

The West Australian

The culinary virtues and medicinal properties of olive trees are not new. After all, the tree has been harvested systematically in the Mediterranean for 4000 years. Its use in cooking and religious ceremonies dates back even further to 3500BC.

The importance of the olive tree — a symbol of purity, wisdom, peace and immortality — has lived on and today it has a variety of uses.

Olive oil is promoted as the healthiest of the oils to eat, by nutritionists and naturopaths alike, because of its high content of monosaturated fats.

It is also used as a base in cosmetics and soaps for people with skin conditions and other complaints such as chemical sensitivities.

In ancient Greece, branches of the olive tree were hung over the door to guard against evils, but in more modern times the leaves have not served much purpose.

That was until science was recently able to show the ancient practice of using leaves to ward off bad things was more than just superstition — it seems to be evidence-based.

Scientists have discovered that oleic acid and oleuropeins — phenolic compounds extracted from the leaves of the *Olea europaea* — contain powerful antioxidants.

Some of those antioxidants are

also found in extra virgin olive oil but according to Olea, the Queensland-based company promoting olive leaf extract, research shows that the quantities of phenolic compounds are in much higher concentrations in the leaves.

Lesley Braun, a pharmacist, naturopath and technical consultant to Mayne Consumer Products, said Australian studies showed there were between 6380mg/litre and 8190mg/litre of phenols in olive leaf extract, compared with between 200mg/litre and 800 mg/litre for extra virgin olive oil.

Ms Braun said the oleuropeins, which are also responsible for the typically bitter and pungent aroma of olives, their oil and their leaves, also carried out anti-thrombotic and anti-inflammatory functions in the body.

The raft of studies on olive leaf extract in the past few years, which have mostly been conducted on animals rather than humans, indicate olive leaf extract may also help reduce high blood pressure.

“Overall, a review of the literature reveals that the number of published clinical trials is sparse; however, the amount of anecdotal evidence is constantly building,” Ms Braun said.

“Some practitioners consider recommending it for its anti-oxidant properties, as adjunctive treatment for patients with mild hypertension

(high blood pressure) or type-2 diabetes, and as both prevention and acute treatment for upper respiratory infections.”

Natalie Baker, a naturopath at Essential Health Centre in Subiaco, said anecdotal evidence suggested olive leaf extract had immune-boosting properties.

But she said there were other vitamins, minerals and herbs, such as zinc, vitamin C, echinacea and andrographis, that were stronger and more effective in treating acute conditions, such as colds and influenza. Ms Baker said good trials had shown olive leaf extracts' most important function was in the treatment of hypertension.

“In some trials, it has been shown to lower blood pressure, both systolic and diastolic,” she said, adding that such conditions should only be managed by a qualified health professional.

“The bitter tonic action of the extract may stimulate production of digestive enzymes, aiding digestion.”

Ms Baker said overall, the olive tree contained a rich source of health-giving properties.

“Olive oil, with its high content of monosaturated fats, has also been shown to improve the health of cellular membranes and it can also have a positive effect on the health of the skin,” she said.